On Friday, November 7, 2014, CSU Bakersfield hosted an international conference celebrating the 75-year anniversary of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*.\(^1\) Having lectured exhaustingly the day before, I was quite tired but still eager to attend. I anticipated seeing the eminent historian James Gregory give the conference keynote address on “Okie migration” and the “Southern Diaspora,” two topics of immense significance to Kern County’s historical legacy.

The Okie legacy is gargantuan in Kern County. Dubbed the most illiterate city in America by popular news magazines, Bakersfieldians are anything but culturally illiterate when considering their Okie past, and they let you know. I recall a white suburban neighbor in 2009 for a house I was sitting in southwest Bakersfield lecturing me, (I was then a history graduate student), about the impact of the Okie migration to Kern County. After establishing his Okie roots, the man boldly asserted, “Damn, you really are a foreigner!”—somehow he felt the right of assessing my recent immigration status from my attentive silence. Struggling to get in a word with this somewhat obnoxious suburban warrior, I failed to inform him that my roots in Bakersfield go back to 1874 when my Mexican great-great-grandfather Eleno Rosales abandoned the Mexican army in search of a better life in the country north of Mexico—some fifty years before the great Okie migration. Foreigner, I was indeed!

The *Bakersfield Californian* ran a short article to drum up interest in the Okie conference. Perhaps the gentleman I encountered years before would be there? (He wasn’t). The article noted that since Gregory’s magnum opus *American Exodus* was first published in the late 1980s, the University of Washington historian had not returned to Bakersfield. Gregory, perhaps more than any other historian, put Kern County on the radars of professional historians.\(^2\) I couldn’t wait to meet him.

To my disappointment, I learned Gregory was ill and unable to attend. I was pleased, however, that the replacement speaker was Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the United Farm Workers (UFW). Huerta, to borrow the words of CSUB Professor Miriam Vivian, is a “pillar of the community” and a name “synonymous with social justice.” Having recently written a 400 plus page dissertation on civil rights history in Bakersfield, anytime I’m able to hear Dolores Huerta speak locally, I’m more than happy to listen.\(^3\) She spoke passionately that morning to a crowd of approximately 100 students and community attendees about the connections between John Steinbeck’s novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the origins of the farm labor movement, mostly via the heart of Fred Ross, Sr. and the Community Service Organization (CSO).

The CSO, in short, was much akin to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for Mexican Americans. Founded in 1947 Los Angeles as an offshoot of Saul Alinksy’s Industrial Areas Foundation, the CSO branched out across California as a major civil rights organization for Mexican Americans, including Bakersfield. It was in the CSO where César Chávez, another famous Kern County denizen, got his start as a community organizer. Conference participants listened attentively to Huerta “school” us on this local history. I was internally ecstatic when Huerta pressed the need for CSUB as an institution to encourage and lead research into the role that people of color have played in shaping California
history. Her talk was well-received, in stark contrast to a keynote address she had delivered a few years prior at a CSUB commencement, where audience members heckled her publicly and in the editorial pages of the Bakersfield Californian for speaking in favor of what they deemed a “liberal agenda.” But really what was the audience expecting from one of America’s foremost labor activists? She ain’t no Gerald Haslam (incidentally, Haslam was the CSUB commencement speaker the following year).

Later that day I presented an article based on my dissertation forthcoming in the Journal of the West. The small classroom was packed; about 25 people altogether, and a nice dialogue ensued between panelists and attendees. Since 2010, as I became ABD (all but dissertation) at UCSB, I have given a version of the talk I presented in one way or another at various conferences locally and around the country. I have never had the opportunity, however, to reflect on how my educational experiences and personal history influenced my approach to writing history, and more specifically, the type of research I do locally in Bakersfield. To that end, I invite readers of this humanities review to enjoy reading about my autobiographical approach to writing Bakersfield into United States civil rights history.

Bakersfield College and the Chicano Civil Rights Movement

In 2003 I graduated with a BA in history from UC Berkeley. I enjoyed my time at Berkeley and was quite cognizant of the strong historical connections between Bakersfield College and the UC’s flagship campus via our longtime college President Grace Bird. In retrospect, I admit that I had much more fun on Telegraph Avenue than I did (or possibly would have) in the Bancroft Library. It wasn’t until I began graduate school that I came to lament the fact I didn’t spend more time in the Bancroft’s wonderful archives, particularly its collection dealing with Kern County. This regret was later pronounced as a poor graduate student, starving for funding to finance research trips to northern California from my small apartment in coastal Santa Barbara.

After graduating Berkeley I returned to Bakersfield not knowing quite what I wanted to do in life. Fortunately my father, David Rosales, was a BC history professor and allowed me to sit in on his courses to observe the classroom experience from the professor’s perspective. That understanding differs greatly from the student perspective. Around that same time, I attended a Kern Community College Board of Trustees meeting where my father was scheduled to speak on behalf of the Chicano Cultural Center at Bakersfield College, slated to close permanently that year due to budgetary cuts and administrative prerogative. I was not unfamiliar with the legacy of the Chicano student movement at Bakersfield College in the 1970s. I had heard about it growing up. I recall however being shocked by the meeting. Many speakers went before the board to oppose the decision to close the center with hundreds of students in attendance. I remember thinking clearly, “didn’t I just leave Berkeley. What is up with all this protest in Bakersfield?”

A few months later I found myself enrolled in a graduate history seminar at CSU Bakersfield. As part of the requirements for the class, students were to write an original research paper based upon primary source documents. My immediate thought was to research more this community-based movement at Bakersfield College. What were the origins of the Chicano student movement at Bakersfield College? What sort of issues mobilized local students politically in the late 1960s
and 1970s? What were their connections, if any, to the United Farm Workers movement and broader Chicano movement? These were some of the preliminary questions that would guide my research agenda for the next ten years of my life.

Civil Rights Historiographies

After completing my graduate work at CSU Bakersfield (MA 2005), I applied for doctoral programs in history. I accepted a fellowship package at UC Santa Barbara. My time in Santa Barbara exposed me to historians from across the United States doing innovative work on civil rights history and Chicano Studies. My mentor, Mario T. García, had a joint appointment in history and Chicano Studies. He impacted my thinking tremendously. His emphasis on “generational history” provided a key framework for writing Mexican American history. It seemed most evidently that my work would fit within the activist generation of Mexican American history known as the Chicano generation of the late 1960s and early 1970s, to distinguish from earlier “immigrant” and “Mexican American” generations of the 1920s and 1940s, respectively. Quite simply, Chicano politics were quite different from Mexican American politics or that of Mexican immigrants. My early seminar papers with Mario García built upon the work I completed at CSU Bakersfield, incorporating more in-depth primary research and oral history interviews with key activists who lived the history I wrote about. I was off and running, so I felt, with at least one chapter completed toward my dissertation project.

As I began to branch out beyond the comfort of Garcia’s seminars, I was challenged by new scholarship on the civil rights movement. More than any other scholar, University of Pennsylvania historian and sociologist Thomas J. Sugrue impacted how I began to think about framing a larger dissertation beyond the Chicano student movement at Bakersfield College. Sugrue’s masterpiece The Origins of the Urban Crisis focused on post-World War II Detroit and the decline of the automobile industry. More specifically he detailed the role public policy played in the maintenance of racial segregation in Detroit’s postwar housing and labor markets. The book was remarkable for many reasons, most notably how it fused the history of postwar liberalism (automobile unions, labor progressives, civil rights organizations) with a more reactive conservatism that sought to undue the New Deal order in Detroit.

The title of Sugrue’s work, the “urban crisis,” made me think broadly about a “rural crisis.” That rhetoric was commonplace in Bakersfield, among both political liberals and conservatives. Perhaps this was a future topic worth researching? This thought occupied my thinking as I began to branch out and read numerous historians who were influenced by Sugrue's writing to see how they applied his insights into additional case studies of their own.

Sugrue’s next book Sweet Land of Liberty further transformed my thinking about writing a Bakersfield civil rights history. The subtitle of Sugrue’s massive 800-page book, “the forgotten struggle for civil rights in the north,” was clear and upfront about his agenda. According to Sugrue, civil rights history in the United States was dominated by what he called “a master narrative,” or to use the words of historian Peniel Joseph, the “heroic period” of the civil rights movement. This narrative, of course, is a southern one—filled by the deeds and actions of evil southern segregationists and neo-confederates, as well as heroes and martyrs like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks.
To Sugrue, the southern narrative was important but obscured an equally important and perhaps more relevant history of civil rights outside the geographical boundaries of the southern states. The north, he argues, was where black and white interacted beyond *de jure* segregation. It was a land where more covert forms of racial discrimination met black resistance head on over a “long civil rights movement” period that preceded the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 and continued long after the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Act in the mid-1960s. For me, I began to think that a civil rights history of the American West was largely absent from Sugrue’s massive synthesis. He publicly told me so when he visited UC Santa Barbara’s Center for Labor, Work, and Democracy prior to the publication of *Sweet Land of Liberty*. With Sugrue’s acknowledgement that his own work did not account for the American West, I felt refreshed knowing that my own work could make a significant contribution to U.S. civil rights historiography by incorporating the west and most importantly the contributions of Mexican Americans.

With this idea in mind of inserting Bakersfield into a larger history of civil rights in the United States, I branched out seeking like-minded scholars. What I found was affirming and inspiring. Mark Brilliant, one of UC Berkeley’s more recent hires received a tenure-track position at the UC flagship campus with an advanced contract at Oxford Press for his dissertation at Stanford. Brilliant examined California’s multiracial civil rights movement, or lack thereof, during the post-World War II era. In 2011, I was fortunate enough to have Mark serve as a chairman for a paper I delivered at the Western History Association’s annual meeting in Lake Tahoe. From there, I followed closely Mark’s work and the network of scholars with whom he associated. This led me to cultivate friendships and collegial relations with a number of other scholars doing work on multiracial civil rights history in the American West, most importantly Lauren Araiza, Brian Behnken, Max Krochmal, and Gordon Mantler. Each of these younger scholars challenged my own work conceptually and validated my research through offering feedback at numerous academic conferences and publications between 2011-2014. As civil rights history in Bakersfield is largely an unexplored topic, it felt reassuring that the larger academic world was definitely interested in knowing more about the history of race, politics, and civil rights in Bakersfield.

**Writing “Mississippi West”**

The results of my research have put Bakersfield’s civil rights history on the radar of professional historians. One of the most satisfying aspects of my work thus far has been that even though I have yet to submit a manuscript for publication into a book monograph, I have already been sought out by a number of younger scholars interested in pursuing research topics dealing with labor and civil rights history in Bakersfield and Kern County, including graduate students at the University of Chicago, San Jose State University, and UC Merced. Instant communication and the internet is creating a world of possibility and collaboration for younger scholars interested in advancing Central Valley research studies more broadly.

Specifically, my dissertation and recent publications argue several historiographical interventions of interest to readers of this journal. First and foremost, I argue that Bakersfield civil rights history is fundamental to understanding the civil rights movement in the American West. Moreover, the civil rights movement within Bakersfield was multiracial and collaborative between Mexican Americans, African Americans, and white racial liberals. Each of these constituencies were critical in building an urban based civil rights movement in communities of
color that were often racially segregated and that seldom interacted. These racial coalitions also built important alliances with the farm labor movement and were affected, in turn, by the rise of the UFW. Conservatives, too, played a key role in Bakersfield’s civil rights history. My research narrates how conservatives responded, adapted, and opposed civil rights reform at the grassroots level in Bakersfield and Kern County in the post-WWII years. Like Sugrue and others, I’ve tried hard to tell a story in my work about how liberalism, civil rights reform, and conservatism evolved after 1945.

Organized over five chapters, my dissertation moved well beyond the Chicano student movement at Bakersfield College. I found that the student movement built upon earlier activism and also was connected to struggles outside the campus. My early chapters focus on the origins of multiracial coalition building from World War II through the early 1960s, as well as detail the early history of the war on poverty in Kern County. The launch of the Delano grape strike in 1965 was a watershed moment in civil rights history in the American West. It affected politics, organizing, and movements in many ways that are only beginning to be recognized by historians. In my later chapters, I explore the course of grassroots political organizing, the Chicano student movement, as well as school desegregation after 1965. Each of these venues, I argue, represented important and diverse strands of Bakersfield’s civil rights movement beyond the farm labor question—the movement became urban. This interpretation is a critical intervention into a burgeoning historiography of the United Farm Workers, none of which addresses adequately, or at all, the local connections to urban civil rights reform this article introduces.

In brief, the Chicano student movement at Bakersfield College was part of a much larger multiracial history of civil rights organizing in a variety of contexts. Researching this history was complicated and I was fortunate enough to be aided by local activists who had paper archives, as well as receive a number of grants to travel to Berkeley, Sacramento, Los Angeles, Detroit, and Washington D.C. to conduct research. I found it incredibly ironic that I had to travel across the country to do a research project on Bakersfield, but grounding this history in established archives, coupled with more locally-based research, I knew was necessary and imperative. So much local history remains buried, locked away in people’s dusty garages, and uncovered. The establishment of a professional archives and research room at CSUB and BC hopefully will continue to build efforts to preserve our local history.

Once my dissertation was completed I anticipated the dread of going on the job market in a field impacted with a plethora of PhDs looking for tenure-track positions. During my ABD phase, I actively taught at Bakersfield College during summer sessions, as well as the Santa Barbara City College, UCSB, CSUB, and Bard College Master of Arts in Teaching Program. By the time I completed my dissertation I had actual teaching experience and felt confident about my applications. I had multiple job offers at various institutions across the country, but the opportunity to come home to Bakersfield, the site of my research (not to mention family) was too good to pass up. I feel blessed everyday to teach at Bakersfield College because it is a wonderful institution that promotes good teaching and now with the Levan Center for the Humanities, active research for its faculty. But, I especially love seeing my research in action at the Delano campus. Delano is the epicenter of civil rights history in the American West. Getting my students excited about this history is rewarding, both from a teaching standpoint but also research point of view. I hope this article encourages readers to take a greater interest
in cultivating future scholarship and collaboration regarding this rich local history I’ve only begun to highlight in these pages.

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1. For an overview of the conference, see the conference website at http://www.grapesofwrathconference.com/.